

TRAVEL BRIEF

# American Travel Survey

# Home *for the* Holidays

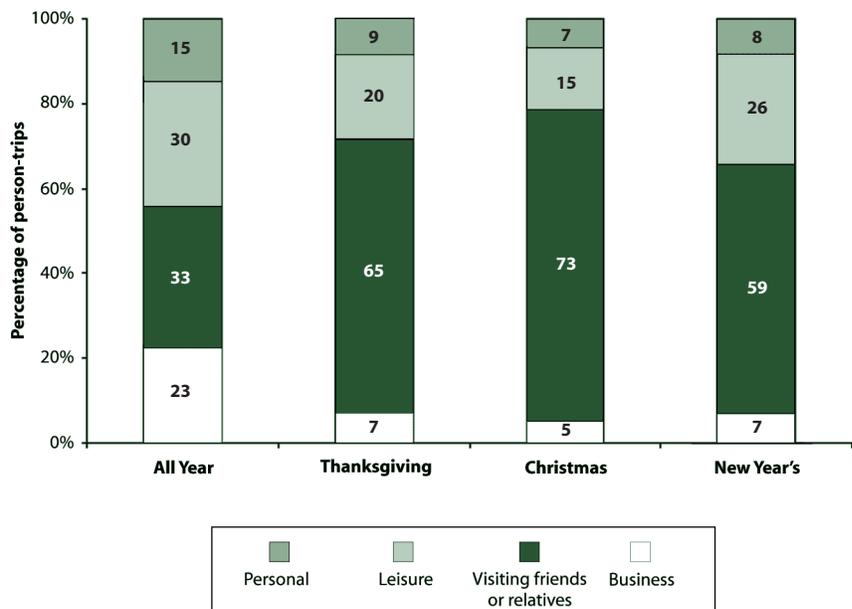
## Family Travel Dominates the Holiday Season

Most holiday trips are made to visit friends and relatives: 73 percent at Christmas, 65 percent at Thanksgiving, and 59 percent at New Year's, compared with 33 percent for the year as a whole (Figure 1). New Year's is more likely to be used for leisure travel, such as skiing or

sightseeing, than either Thanksgiving or Christmas, but all three holidays have a lower proportion of leisure travel than the year as a whole. The share of business travel drops dramatically during the holidays from 23 percent for the year as a whole to 5 percent for Christmas and 7 percent for both Thanksgiving and New Year's (Table 1).

Holiday travel often involves families traveling together, which raises the size

**Figure 1.**  
Holiday Travel by Main Purpose of Trip



Source: U.S. Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, American Travel Survey, 1995.

of the traveling party and lowers the median age of all travelers. At Thanksgiving, 41 percent of trips included at least one adult and one child, compared with only 30 percent, on average, for the whole year. The comparable figures for Christmas and New Year's are 40 and 44 percent, respectively. The median age of travelers drops from 38 for the year to 37 for Thanksgiving and New Year's travelers, and 36 for Christmas travelers. The average travel party size on Thanksgiving is 2.5 persons and 2.6 persons on Christmas and New Year's, compared with 2.2 for the whole year.

Among Thanksgiving travelers, 68 percent consider their trip a vacation, compared with 70 percent of Christmas travelers, and 75 percent of New Year's travelers.

About 5.8 million Americans make only one long-distance trip during the year, either at Christmas or Thanksgiv-

ing. Another 6.6 million travel home for both holidays, but make no other trips during the year. Just over 2 million people travel only at New Year's.

**Sunday after Thanksgiving is Heaviest Travel Day of the Year**

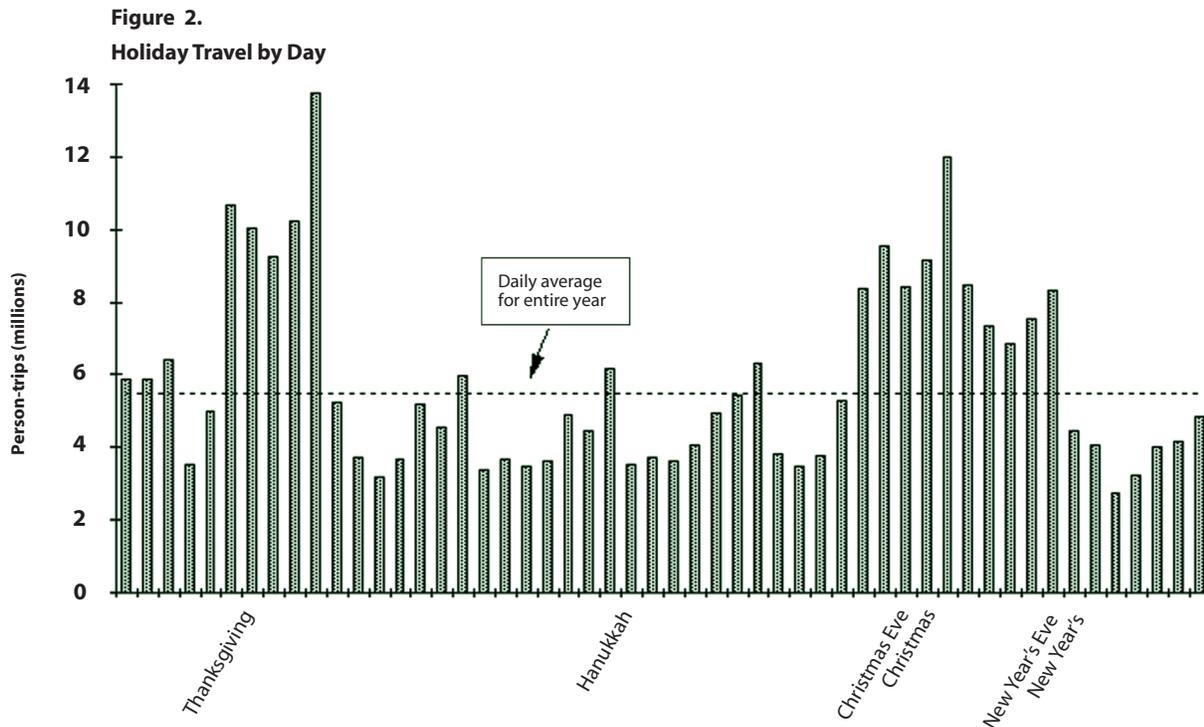
The most traveled day of the holiday period—and of the entire year—is the Sunday after Thanksgiving, when 13.7 million long-distance trips are made (Figure 2). The day after Christmas is the second most traveled day during the holidays, with 12 million trips. New Year's Eve is less traveled than either Christmas or Thanksgiving, with 8.3 million people traveling. There appears to be no increased pattern of travel associated with the celebration of Hanukkah.

While Christmas and Thanksgiving record about the same amount of travel, Thanksgiving's high volume of travel is

concentrated in fewer days, which places a heavier burden on the transportation system. During the five days surrounding Thanksgiving, an average of 10.8 million trips are taken per day, nearly double the average number of daily trips for the whole year; the daily average for the five days around Christmas is 9.5 million trips, but more Christmas travelers leave earlier and stay longer than Thanksgiving travelers so that trips are spread out over a longer period of time.

New Year's is a less traveled five-day holiday period, because the first few days of the New Year are relatively light travel days. During the five days surrounding New Year's Day, Americans take an average of 6.3 million trips per day.

Holiday travel accounts for 8.3 percent of all trips and 9.8 percent of all miles traveled during the year. Trips taken during the five-day periods around Thanksgiving and Christmas account for



Note: Data are based on a departing trip or a returning trip taking place each day during the holiday travel period. Source: U.S. Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, American Travel Survey, 1995.

6.3 percent of America's annual trips and 6.8 percent of the miles. The five-day period around New Year's Day accounts for 2.1 percent of all annual trips and 3 percent of miles.

### Cars Dominate Holiday Travel

With more families traveling, a higher proportion of people drive and a lower proportion fly on long-distance holiday trips. The share of trips made by personal use vehicle is 83 percent for both Christmas and Thanksgiving, compared with 81 percent for the entire year, while the share of air travel is 15.2 percent for Thanksgiving and 15.5 percent at Christmas, compared with 16.1 percent for the year. New Year's is the only exception, with a lower than average share driving (78.9 percent) and a higher than average share flying (18.5 percent).

Despite the fact that a greater share of people drive to and from their Thanks-

giving and Christmas destinations, air travel doubles during the holidays. Airports are the most congested on the Sunday after Thanksgiving (2.0 million people traveling), the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, December 27th, and New Year's Eve (each with about 1.7 million people traveling).

### Holiday Trips are Longer than Average

People spend more nights away from home on New Year's (4.3 nights) and Christmas trips (3.4 nights) than on trips during the rest of the year (3.2 nights). Only Thanksgiving trips are shorter in duration, averaging only 3.0 nights away from home.

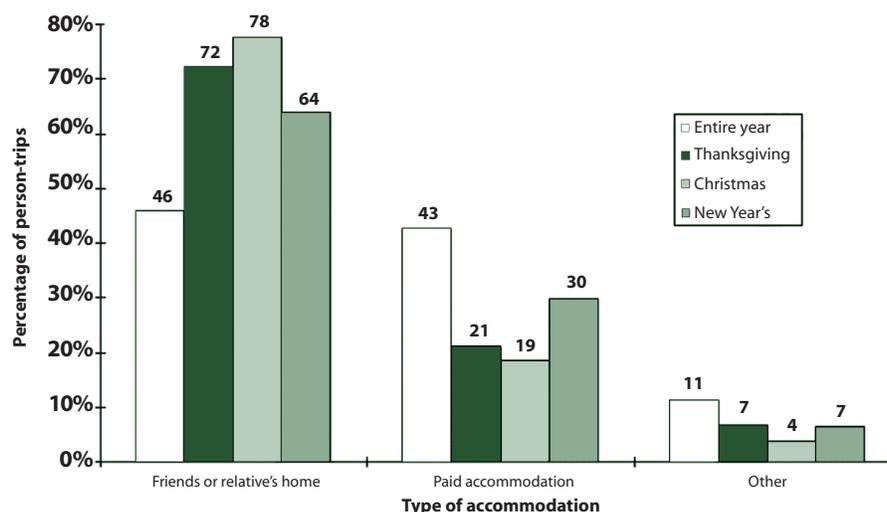
New Year's travelers journey the farthest (526 miles one way), followed by Christmas (413 miles) and Thanksgiving travelers (386 miles). Average trip distance for the year, overall, is 413 miles

one way. The greater share of travelers flying at New Year's contribute to the higher trip distance.

### Holiday Travelers Stay with Friends and Relatives

When people travel for Thanksgiving and Christmas, they usually stay in the homes of friends or relatives (Figure 3). During Christmas, more than three-quarters of travelers stay with friends or relatives, compared with less than half for the whole year. Fewer than 1 in 5 stay in some type of paid accommodation, such as a hotel or a rented vacation home. The pattern is similar for Thanksgiving, but less so for New Year's, when nearly 30 percent stay in paid accommodations, either hotels, motels or rented cabins or condominiums.

**Figure 3.**  
**Accommodations Used by Holiday Travelers**



Source: U.S. Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, American Travel Survey, 1995.

### **Holiday Travelers Younger and Poorer**

Thirty-one percent of travelers at New Year's are under 25 years old, compared with 25 percent during the entire year. Travelers under 25 constitute 29 percent of the total at Thanksgiving and 28 percent of travelers at Christmas. Also, a smaller share of travelers during the holidays, particularly around New Year's, are over 65 years old. During the year, an average of 9 percent of long-distance travelers are over 65, compared with 7 percent at New Year's, and 8 percent at Christmas and Thanksgiving.

A higher proportion of people in low-income households travel at Christmas than during other times of the year. Among persons in households earning less than \$25,000 a year, 17.1 percent travel during Christmas, compared with 15.5 percent during the year. High-income travelers (those in households earning over \$50,000) are more prevalent during New Year's, making 50.0 percent of trips, compared with 47.7 percent during the year. In terms of income, travelers at Thanksgiving are very similar to those during the entire year.

A slightly higher proportion of women and racial and ethnic minorities travel during the holidays than during

the entire year (Table 2). For instance, at Thanksgiving, 47 percent of travelers are women, compared with 45 percent during the entire year. And at New Year's, 14 percent of travelers are racial and ethnic minorities, compared with 11 percent for the year.

### **Highway Fatality Rates are Lower During the Holidays**

Despite the increased numbers of travelers and passenger miles traveled by automobile, the holidays are a relatively safe time of the year to travel. There are 9.3 highway fatalities per 100 million miles of long-distance automobile passenger travel during the year, compared with 3.4 fatalities per 100 million at Christmas, 3.9 fatalities at Thanksgiving, and 4.6 fatalities at New Year's. Lower fatality rates during the holidays can be attributed to the high proportion of interstate driving, a greater police presence, and lower rates of commuter driving, where most highway-related deaths occur.

Although highway fatalities decrease during the holidays, alcohol-related highway deaths increase. In 1995, the proportion of alcohol-related deaths was 49 percent during the holiday period, compared with 41 percent for the year as

a whole. Surprisingly, in 1995, the proportion of alcohol-related highway fatalities was higher at Thanksgiving (52 percent), than at either Christmas (47 percent) and New Year's (48 percent). However, during the 10-year period between 1986–95, alcohol-related deaths were highest at New Year's (59.5 percent), while Thanksgiving and Christmas were lower at 53.9 percent each.



The ATS was sponsored by the Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS) and conducted by the Bureau of the Census in 1995. The ATS collected information on the origin, destination, volume, and characteristics of long-distance travel of approximately 80,000 households in the United States. The survey gathered demographic characteristics of household members regardless of age as well as information about their trips. Trip characteristics included such items as the origin and destination of the trip, stops along the way, the principal mode of transportation, the access and egress modes to airports, train and bus stations, and information about the travel party. Other information included the reason for the trip, number of nights spent away from home, and the type of lodging.

**Table 1.**  
**Holiday Travel by Selected Trip Characteristics: 1995**  
 (Numbers are in thousands)

Trip characteristics	ALL YEAR		THANKSGIVING		CHRISTMAS		NEW YEAR'S	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
All person-trips	1,001,319	100.0	31,587	100.0	31,194	100.0	20,687	100.0
<b>Principal means of transportation:</b>								
Personal use vehicle	813,858	81.3	26,259	83.1	25,985	83.3	16,318	78.9
Airplane	161,165	16.1	4,803	15.2	4,848	15.5	3,828	18.5
Bus	20,445	2.0	303	1.0	211	0.7	316	1.5
Train	4,994	0.5	171	0.5	85	0.3	185	0.9
Other	857	0.1	51	0.2	65	0.2	29	0.1
<b>One-way distance:</b>								
Less than 150 miles	306,433	30.6	7,604	24.1	8,613	27.6	4,139	20.0
150 to 249 miles	274,045	27.4	8,719	27.6	8,013	25.7	4,521	21.9
250 to 499 miles	214,006	21.4	9,066	28.7	7,393	23.7	5,121	24.8
500 to 999 miles	108,331	10.8	3,882	12.3	4,054	13.0	3,881	18.8
1,000 miles or more	98,503	9.8	2,316	7.3	3,122	10.0	3,025	14.6
Mean (miles)	413		386		413		526	
<b>Main purpose of trip:</b>								
Business	224,835	22.5	2,220	7.0	1,649	5.3	1,444	7.0
Pleasure	630,110	62.9	26,678	84.5	27,510	88.2	17,537	84.8
Visit relatives or friends	330,755	33.0	20,360	64.5	22,895	73.4	12,093	58.5
Leisure	299,355	29.9	6,319	20.0	4,614	14.8	5,444	26.3
Personal business and other	146,374	14.6	2,688	8.5	2,035	6.5	1,706	8.2
<b>Vacation or weekend trips:</b>								
Vacation trip	515,383	51.5	21,481	68.0	21,802	69.9	15,510	75.0
Weekend trip	621,948	62.1	18,648	59.0	14,902	47.8	9,715	47.0
1 or 2 nights away from home	377,893	37.7	6,573	20.8	5,379	17.2	3,922	19.0
3 to 5 nights away from home	244,055	24.4	12,074	38.2	9,523	30.5	5,793	28.0
<b>Travel party type:</b>								
One adult, no children under 18	386,510	38.6	8,781	27.8	7,951	25.5	5,288	25.6
Two or more adults, no children under 18	299,485	29.9	9,394	29.7	10,128	32.5	5,758	27.8
One adult, children under 18	67,959	6.8	2,068	6.5	1,875	6.0	1,599	7.7
Two or more adults, children under 18	225,875	22.6	10,858	34.4	10,665	34.2	7,562	36.6
No adult, one or more children under 18	21,489	2.1	485	1.5	575	1.8	479	2.3
Mean travel party size	2.16		2.53		2.57		2.63	
<b>Nights away from home:</b>								
None	239,727	23.9	4,251	13.5	3,708	11.9	3,008	14.5
1 to 3 nights	502,465	50.2	16,093	50.9	14,622	46.9	8,104	39.2
4 to 7 nights	184,766	18.5	10,118	32.0	10,333	33.1	5,814	28.1
8 or more nights	74,361	7.4	1,126	3.6	2,531	8.1	3,760	18.2
Mean (nights)	3.21		3.02		3.44		4.32	
<b>Type of lodging at destination:</b>								
Friend's or relative's home	345,506	45.9	19,714	72.1	21,358	77.7	11,280	63.8
Hotel, motel, or resort	282,929	37.6	5,144	18.8	4,497	16.4	4,396	24.9
Rented cabin, condo, or vacation home	38,572	5.1	608	2.2	621	2.3	853	4.8
Owned cabin, condo, or vacation home	30,648	4.1	856	3.1	495	1.8	569	3.2
Camper, trailer, recreational vehicle, tent	22,208	3.0	344	1.3	166	0.6	158	0.9
Other type of lodging	32,095	4.3	670	2.5	349	1.3	423	2.4

**Note:** Data in this table are based on travelers who departed and/or returned in the five-day period surrounding each holiday. Thanksgiving is defined as the Wednesday before through the Sunday after the holiday. Christmas and New Year's are defined as the period from two days before the holiday to two days after.

**Table 2.**  
**Holiday Travel by Selected Traveler Characteristics: 1995**  
 (Numbers are in thousands)

Traveler characteristics	ALL YEAR		THANKSGIVING		CHRISTMAS		NEW YEAR'S	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
All person-trips	1,001,319	100.0	31,587	100.0	31,194	100.0	20,687	100.0
<b>Age</b>								
Less than 25 years	252,332	25.2	9,171	29.0	8,840	28.3	6,460	31.2
25 to 64 years	656,865	65.6	19,898	63.0	19,792	63.4	12,753	61.6
65 years and over	93,123	9.3	2,518	8.0	2,563	8.2	1,474	7.1
Median (years)	38		37		36		37	
<b>Sex</b>								
Male	550,807	55.0	16,671	52.8	16,820	53.9	10,770	52.1
Female	450,512	45.0	14,916	47.2	14,374	46.1	9,917	47.9
<b>Race</b>								
White	891,443	89.0	27,763	87.9	27,720	88.9	17,760	85.9
Black	59,923	6.0	1,916	6.1	1,808	5.8	1,560	7.5
American Indian, Eskimo, or Aleut	10,707	1.1	166	0.5	233	0.7	192	0.9
Asian or Pacific Islander	22,922	2.3	1,089	3.4	874	2.8	688	3.3
Other	16,324	1.6	652	2.1	558	1.8	487	2.4
<b>Hispanic origin</b>								
Hispanic origin	52,822	5.3	1,803	5.7	2,095	6.7	1,180	5.7
Not of Hispanic origin	948,498	94.7	29,785	94.3	29,099	93.3	19,507	94.3
<b>Household income</b>								
Less than \$25,000	155,555	15.5	5,150	16.3	5,331	17.1	3,185	15.4
\$25,000 to \$49,999	368,485	36.8	11,044	35.0	11,688	37.5	7,158	34.6
\$50,000 or more	477,629	47.7	15,393	48.7	14,175	45.4	10,344	50.0
<b>Household type</b>								
Family household	840,438	83.9	25,881	81.9	25,205	80.8	18,127	87.6
Married-couple family hshld.	726,982	72.6	22,678	71.8	21,112	67.7	14,500	70.1
With children under 18 years	379,139	37.9	13,101	41.5	11,805	37.8	8,826	42.7
Female householder	76,942	7.7	2,142	6.8	2,574	8.3	3,134	15.1
With children under 18 years	43,389	4.3	1,195	3.8	1,490	4.8	2,291	11.1
Male householder	36,515	3.6	1,062	3.4	1,520	4.9	493	2.4
With children under 18 years	13,226	1.3	567	1.8	687	2.2	289	1.4
Nonfamily household	160,881	16.1	5,705	18.1	5,989	19.2	3,604	17.4
<b>Educational attainment</b>								
Persons 16 years and over	859,620	100.0	25,748	100.0	25,547	100.0	16,467	100.0
Less than high school graduate	68,329	7.9	1,802	7.0	1,634	6.4	1,041	6.3
High school graduate	219,549	25.5	5,739	22.3	5,597	21.9	3,560	21.6
Some college, no degree	182,146	21.2	5,634	21.9	5,247	20.5	3,549	21.6
Associate's degree	58,431	6.8	1,364	5.3	1,652	6.5	939	5.7
Bachelor's degree	193,651	22.5	6,505	25.3	6,413	25.1	3,980	24.2
Some grad school or grad deg.	137,513	16.0	4,704	18.3	5,005	19.6	3,397	20.6
<b>Trip frequency</b>								
Persons for whom this is only trip	77,070	7.7	2,968	9.4	2,823	9.1	2,063	10.0

**Note:** Data in this table are based on travelers who departed and/or returned in the five-day period surrounding each holiday. Thanksgiving is defined as the Wednesday before through the Sunday after. Christmas and New Year's are defined as the period from two days before the holiday to two days after.

**Table 3.**  
**Holiday Person Trips, Person Miles of Travel, and Fatalities**  
 (Numbers are in thousands)

Trip characteristics	ALL YEAR		THANKSGIVING		CHRISTMAS		NEW YEAR'S	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
<b>Person trips (thousands)</b>	<b>1,001,319</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>31,587</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>31,194</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>20,687</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Personal use vehicle	813,858	81.3	26,259	83.1	25,985	83.3	16,318	78.9
Commercial airplane	155,936	15.6	4,803	15.2	4,848	15.5	3,828	18.5
<b>Person miles (millions)</b>	<b>826,804</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>27,766</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>28,411</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>24,946</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Personal use vehicle	451,590	54.6	14,855	53.5	15,147	53.3	12,293	49.3
Commercial airplane	347,933	42.1	12,259	44.2	12,880	45.3	11,877	47.6
<b>Fatalities<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>41,798</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b><sup>2</sup>527</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b><sup>3</sup>357</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b><sup>3</sup>392</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Alcohol-related fatalities <sup>1</sup>	17,274	41.3	<sup>2</sup> 275	52.2	<sup>3</sup> 167	46.7	<sup>3</sup> 188	48.0
Fatalities per 100 million person miles of travel	9.3	NA	3.9	NA	3.4	NA	4.6	NA
Alcohol related fatalities per 100 million person miles of travel	3.8	NA	2.1	NA	1.6	NA	2.2	NA

<sup>1</sup>U.S. Department of Transportation, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), *Traffic Safety Facts, 1995* (Washington, DC: 1996).

<sup>2</sup>Based on a 4 1/2-day period; person-trips are adjusted to a 4 1/2 day period to match the NHTSA fatality data.

<sup>3</sup>Based on a 3 1/2-day period; person-trips are adjusted to a 3 1/2 day period to match the NHTSA fatality data.

**Note:** Data in this table are based on travelers who departed and/or returned in the five-day period surrounding each holiday. Thanksgiving is defined as the Wednesday before through the Sunday after. Christmas and New Year's are defined as the period from two days before the holiday to two days after.



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Home  
*for the*  
Holidays

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The American Travel Survey collected information from approximately 80,000 households about their long-distance travel in 1995. The ATS provides answers on how, why, where, when, and who travels in America.

The *Home for the Holidays* publication contains an overview of the travel characteristics of Americans during the holiday season, loosely defined as the period from November 23–January 2, which encompasses three major holidays. The report is intended to give a sample of the kinds of data available from the American Travel Survey.

For availability of data products and information about the American Travel Survey, contact the Bureau of Transportation Statistics at:



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